DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 319 078 CS 507 152

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TITLE The Interviewer as Critic: Distortion of the Voice in the Collection of Oral Narratives.
PUB DATE Nov 89
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (75th, San Francisco, CA, November 18-21, 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Field Interviews; Interpersonal Communication; *Oral History; *Personal Narratives; *Rhetorical Criticism; Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Interviewer Effects; *Narratology; Voice (Rhetoric)

ABSTRACT

While oral narratives have received much attention in recent years as texts for performance, the literature is weakest at the very base of the narrative script, the interview. The shaping of the narrative, which can include distortion and alteration, begins during the course of the interview. Excerpts from interviews with coal miners illustrate how apt is the metaphor of the interviewer as critic. Interviews can be altered by seeking clarification, by changing the subject, by directing an interview performance (by which the interviewer puts him/herself in an imaginary situation and asks questions about it), and by reacting in a positive or neutral way to the interviewee. Those conducting interviews must be sensitive to how even their physical characteristics (such as gender) and social backgrounds can influence interviewees. (SG)

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The Interviewer as Critic: Distortion of the Voice in the Collection of Oral Narratives

by

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Oral narratives have received much attention in recent years as texts for performance.[1] The literature has often dealt with the implications of using such texts in performance and with the transcribing process.[2] This body of work has shed much light on the responsibilities inherent in dealing with stories that emerge from real people in the world.

The literature is weakest, however, at the very base of the oral narrative script--the interview. Most scholars treat the interview situation in a prescriptive fashion, or else give it a cursory glance and hurry on to the dilemma of transcribing and editing.[3] It is in the transcribing and editing process that collectors of oral narratives seem to feel that the distortion of the voice of the other begins to occur. The process of the shaping of the discourse takes on much ethical weight as the editor struggles with creating an aesthetic text that retains the meanings and levels implicit in the complete original narratives. Perhaps the concern of those interested in using oral narratives in performance has traditionally centered around the transcribing/editing process because of the shift in medium. The move from orality to print can alter meaning.

While such an interest is certainly not misplaced, an additional alteration of meaning in the collection of oral narratives occurs. It is my concern that the narrative begins to be shaped much earlier--during the course of the interview itself--and that such shaping is often careless

and unacknowledged because the dynamics of the interview situation have not received enough careful attention. In order to develop such a claim, this paper will look at ways in which the interview situation has traditionally been described and then offer an alternative way of thinking of that situation. I will use my own experience of collecting coal mining narratives in western Kentucky and southern Illinois to describe the distortion and alteration of meaning that can occur in the interview itself.

The Nature of the Interview Situation

The interview process has often been compared to a conversation.[4] Such a comparison stems from a belief that the participants enjoy a relatively equal relationship, that what occurs carries a kind of mutual reciprocity. The success or failure of the interview to enter the conversational realm is contingent on two things: (1) the intention of the researcher and (2) the curiosity/interest of the participant. If the researcher approaches the participant as another human being that he/she would like to get to know better rather than as a research subject from which to extract information, then a genuine dialogue can emerge which can result in both researcher and subject gaoining insight into a topic of common interest. For the conversational nature of the interview to really manifest itself, however, the interviewee must also hold a deep interest or curiosity about

the topic or theme that is being explored. If both of these contingencies are met, then a genuine dialogue can emerge.

This view does not give a lot of weight to the power of hierarchical structures or to the suspicion with which the "outsider" can be regarded. The assumption is made that the sincerity of the researcher can even out any inequality in the relational structure. The use of the conversational metaphor, then, excludes the possibility of an exploration of meaning alteration that can emerge from unequal relational structure. The conversational metaphor also seems to focus attention on the exchange between interviewer and interviewee rather than on the voice of the narrator. For this reason it becomes an awkward metaphor with which to explore the possibility of the distortion of the voice of the other.

A metaphor which is more useful in talking about voice is that of the interview as performance.[6] Kristina Minister urges collectors of oral histories to view the interview situation as a performance "for an absent audience."[7] In this way, she calls attention to the constructed nature of the interview situation and casts both interviewer and interviewee in the role of "performer." It is important to note in this schema, however, that the "audience" exists only as a construct in the minds of the performers, and not as a very present force to be responded to. Because the audience is conceptualized as absent, the immediate embodiment of the other as a trasnsformative force becomes de-emphasized.

It is much more valuable to an understanding of how meaning is shaped in an interview situation, if we recast this frame in a little different way. The interview is a performance situation in which both interviewer and interviewee assume the role of performer and audience, but for each other. The audience for each is present, embodied in the other. Furthermore, because the interviewer has requested the interview and established the agenda, he/she has control of the interview situation. By that I mean that the interviewee is aware that the interviewer has specific reasons for wanting to conduct the interview. Whether or not those reasons are ever made explicit, the interviewee has an awareness that the agenda belongs to the interviewer and that his/her obligation is to respond to that agenda in some way. That immediately establishes the interviewer as actor and the interviewee as reactor and, because of that disparity in control, creates an implicit role for the interviewer as critic. The interview then becomes a performance situation in which the performer (the interviewee) is responding to an empowered audience embodied as critic (the interviewer).

The Shaping of the Performance

That the interview is, in some respects, a shaped performance is an idea that has been acknowledged by others; but that shaping is often viewed as a positive aspect of the interview rather than a distortion of text. Minister asserts

that, "The interviewer can better be described as a director-producer who nurtures the performance with intense attention and occasional concise and simply constructed questions."[8] The idea, then, is that the interviewer is an enabling force that centers and opens up the performance of the interviewee. A question that arises is, might there not be times that the interviewer could actually serve to alter the narrative of the interviewee? That is an argument that this paper will attempt to make.

While the interviewer can serve to help open up a narrative, the question arises whether that is for the benefit of the audience rather than the benefit of the teller. Because of the nature of what we do, our projected audience is never far from our minds. This may well emerge out of a genuine desire to share the story of the other with those who would not otherwise hear it, but we are well aware that first we must make them want to listen. Because of that very real concern, we may attempt to open up that narrative in ways we feel would make it more accessible for the audience, at the expense of failing to privilege the experience of the other.

Coal Mining Narratives

For six months I conducted interviews in the western Kentucky and southern Illinois areas to collect coal mining narratives. I then turned those interviews into a

performance script that attempted to open up the experiences of coal miners and their families in this area.

As a member of that culture (I am a coal miner's daughter from western Kentucky), I am very interested in the possibility of letting the voices of that segment of the population be heard. I am also aware that my entrance into the academic community has effectively removed me from that culture and that, in many ways, I am now looking at it as an "outsider." I am extremely concerned, therefore, with the authenticity of the voice that emerges from the script. I have, consequently, given much consideration to the way in which I, as interviewer, have shaped these narratives.

In order to more closely examine ways in which the oral narrative becomes altered in an interview situation, I would like to examine some short segments of transcripts that I have recorded from these narratives, which I think are particularly good at opening up the metaphor of interviewer as critic.

Clarification

A common device device in an interview situation is a question that asks for clarification of a particular aspect of a teller's story. This is often necessary because an interviewer could lose the sense of the narrative or have trouble placing that narrative in scene when developing the script, if the elaboration or detail is not sufficient. But

the interruption of a narrative by the use of the clarifying question may do three things: (1) it may change the course of the narrative, (2) it may call into question the language use of the teller, and (3) it may focus the teller's attention on the relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

The following is a brief excerpt from a transcript in which I asked a question, the interviewee began a narrative, and I interjected a clarifying question:

> Q: You said you were injured. Can you tell me what happened?
>
> A: I was running a loader and a rib rolled off on me and broke 12 ribs.
>
> Q: A what rolled off?

The interviewee explained that a rib was a wall of coal and then went back into the narrative. The narrative he went on to relate, however, was not the same one that he would have given without the interruption. By asking that question, I interrupted the normal pattern of telling that the interviewee would have engaged in and caused him to focus on an aspect of the narrative that he would not otherwise have dealt with. For him, the term "rib" needed no clarification, and to ask him to elaborate on that was to ask him to re-prioritize his narrative. The question carried with it an implied criticism that he was not giving me adequate information.

It also carried with it a critique of the language used

by the teller to relate the narrative. A term that was an integral part of his cultural communication was rejected as non-communicative in the interview context. Therefore, he was not only influenced to re-direct his narrative, he was constrained by my lack of comprehension to abandon the language he would normally have used in the telling.

Finally, the question automatically served to channel the attention of the interviewee toward my relationship to him and his community. I had gained access to this narrator because he was a coal mining buddy of my father's. That status of being my father's daughter allowed me entrance into his confidence. The coal mining community is one that is often suspicious of the outsider. To ask about a term that an insider should know told him that I was really not part of that community and/or that I felt it necessary to remind him that he was not only speaking for me, but for a larger audience. I was asking him, in essence, to change his performance style to accommodate an expanded sense of audience.

With the use of one question, I implicitly asked him to change the direction of his narrative, to abandon his cultural communication code, and to use a style that would embrace a larger sense of audience. Because he responded to me as critic, he did his best to comply. During the rest of the interview, he was very careful to explain any mining term that he might use. While this was often helpful, it

might have directed his attention away from more important (to him) aspects of his narrative, and I wonder if the telling of "his" story left him satisfied or frustrated.

Changing the Subject

Another way in which the interviewer functions as critic is by evaluating when a line of questioning is no longer effective and then moving on to the next topic or concern. For instance, during one of my interviews, I asked the miner if there were rats in the mine. This question had, during previous interviews with other miners, elicited some wonderful "rat stories" that bordered on the fantastic. His reply was, in part:

> Yes. There are several rats down there. That's just part of it. . .you don't just go in there and move 'em out of your way or whatever. You may see two or three a day. . .

By this time, I had decided that one of those "wonderful rat stories" was not going to be forthcoming, and I abruptly changed directions by asking, "Is there a lot of kidding around down there?" The interviewee had been about to continue with his matter-of-fact narrative concerning the rat population, but immediately tried to respond to the new agenda.

This particular narrator did not have a humorous style, but in attempting to respond to the last question, he tried to adopt one. He kept trying to come up with a funny story, but could not, and instead, kept breaking into nervous

laughter. His discomfort was obvious and I can only believe that he was responding to an unvoiced criticism by me that he wasn't being entertaining enough.

This is a good example of a claim that I made earlier in this paper that the interviewer, in approaching the other, often privileges the prospective audience for the script rather than the teller. I was so busy critiquing the material for its future performability that I forgot to be sensitive to the real person in front of me who was trying to tell me something in his own way. I was already thinking of his narrative as my script. It served as a jarring reminder to me that the ethical pitfalls outlined by Conquergood are not applicable only to the performer of an ethnographic text, but to the collector of that text as well.[9]

Directing an Interview Performance

Another strategy an interviewer might adopt is that of asking the interviewee to place him/herself in an imaginary situation. I am very interested in trying to create, with the completed script, a sensory experience of the underground mine, but getting really descriptive material is often difficult. I was not getting much elaboration by asking, "What's it like down there?" Instead, I began to ask the miners to "describe what it is like being underground for someone who's never been down there." The miners all responded positively to that framing of the question, and

I ended up with some wonderfully imagistic descriptions. I think they rather enjoyed being asked to "pretend" and they had fun with it. It cast them into the role of authority. They knew this information and I didn't; for a while, that disparity in control was reversed. They could tell I was delighted with the descriptions and they really played off that. I was still serving as critic, but in a more positive way. By leaning forward, nodding, using short utterances such as "Oh, my" or "really?" , I was letting them know that the performance was going well and that they should continue. The fact remains that those descriptions would not have been forthcoming if I had not asked them to consciously shift their perception of audience, and they had not responded in a positive way. In a very real sense, I was directing their performance instead of eliciting their reaction to an experience.

Embodiment as Criticism

The final way in which I would like to posit that the interviewer serves the critic's role is perhaps the most difficult to control, and that is through the very fact of his/her physical presence. In an interview situation, I try to either respond in a positive manner, as suggested by H. Russell Bernard, or to keep as neutral a face as possible.[10] There are times, however, when I am sure that my facade slips.

I was interviewing a young man who had made several disparaging remarks about women working in the mines. At one point I asked him, as noncommittally as possible, why he thought a woman would want to work there. He replied, "Too much testosterone, probably." I didn't say anything, but something must have registered on my face or in my body posture, because he continued rather hurriedly:

> No, that--that--that was a lot of it, but then there was also women who had to have the money--so--so, just like anybody else.

It is entirely possible that part of that qualification was due to the fact that I am a woman, and he might make certain assumptions about my attitude toward the initial statement based solely on that biological fact. In that case, the very body that houses me would have served as an implicit critical stance. Furthermore, because I did indeed have problems with that statement, I failed to maintain eye contact and became very busy checking my tape recorder. I felt then, and I feel now, the the elaboration of his original statement was not a clarification of his feelings, but a projection of mine.

There are many times in the process of collecting oral narratives that we will encounter value systems or belief systems that run counter to our own. However, it is recognized that such narratives are very valuable and that we can not expect the other to be who we are or feel like we do. The problem remains that we react in certain

physiological ways that reveal our critical stance and that we are housed in biologically specific bodies that may imply a critical stance. As a result, we may go into certain interview situations with a reduced potential to establish a dialogue, because of who we are in the world.

Conclusion

Retaining the voice of the other is not simply a matter for the consideration of the transcriber/editor or for the performer, but for the interviewer as well. Without an awareness of the influence of the critical role of the interviewer, the ability to achieve understanding of the other through genuine dialogic encounter is greatly diminished.

Because interviews are bound by time and space, what is expedient to uncover the most information often takes precedence over the needs or desires of the teller. That is a problem with no easy solutions, but awareness has to be the first step. Every question and every reaction in an interview situation constructs the voice of the other by its implicit critical agenda.

The tools we have with which to approach the other--our bodies and our minds--carry with them the marks of certain critical stances. We need to be sensitive to how our own physicalities and social histories may constrain the voice of the other.

Finally, as collectors of oral narratives for the purpose of performance, we need to give more thought to the layered levels in which we hear those narrative voices. While we are serving as audience for the interviewee, we are also anticipating future audiences for the narrative we are hearing.

The field of performance has made many claims about giving voice to the other, entering into a dialogic encounter with the other, and re-constituting self through narrative.[11] But before we can move in that direction, we need to give much more careful attention to the interview situation itself.

NOTES

[1]See especially Dwight Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," Literature in Performance 5 (April 1985): 1-12; Isabel M. Crouch and Gordon R. Owen, eds., Proceedings of Seminar/Conference on Oral Traditions (Las Cruces, New Mexico: New Mexico State University, 1983); Kristin Langellier, "Personal Narratives and Performance," Renewal and Revision: The Future of Interpretation Ted Colson,ed. (Denton: NB Omega, 1986) 132-144.

[2]The most detailed and revealing work on the transcription process with which I am familiar is Elizabeth C. Fine, The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Dwight Conquergood brings ethical questions to the foreground of performance thought in "Performing as a Moral Act".

[3]Two good texts on interviewing method are H. Russell Bernard, Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 1988) and Michael Quinn Patton, Qualitative Evaluation Methods (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1980). Some editing guidelines are set forth by Kristina Minister in "The Scheherazade Solution: Dialogic Self-Empowerment and Cultural Interrogation," presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Boston, November 1987.

[4]For example, see Steinar Kvale, "The Qualitative Research Interview: A Phenomenological and a Hermeneutical Mode of Understanding," Journal of Phenomenological Psychology 3 (1983)

[5]Sandra J. Weber, "The Nature of Interviewing," Phenomenology and Pedagogy 4.2 (1986)

[6]Minister, "The Scheherazade Solution."

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act."

[10]Bernard, Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology. He states that "You can encourage an informant to continue with a narrative by just making affirmative noises, like 'uh-huh,' or 'yes, I see,' or 'right, uh-huh,' and so on."

[11]Langellier, "Personal Narratives and Performance;" Kay Ellen Capo, "From Academic to Social-Political Uses of Performance," in Performance of Literature in Historical Perspectives, D.W. Thompson, ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America,1983) 437-458; Barbara Meyerhoff, "Telling One's Story," The Center Magazine 3 (1980) 22-40; Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act."